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USSR-EGYPT

Both Moscow and Cairo appear to be making an effort to de-emphasize the impact on Soviet-Egyptian relations of the indefinite postponement of Soviet party boss Brezhnev's trip to the Middle East.

The two governments announced the postponement after two days of talks in the USSR between Soviet leaders and Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmi and War Minister Gamasy. Press commentary referred to the friendly atmosphere during the talks, as did the windup communiqué. The communiqué was short and made no mention of additional Soviet military assistance to Egypt. It stated that both sides agreed the Geneva conference on the Middle East should resume "at an early date." This represents something of a sop to the Soviets, although Cairo has made positive statements regarding Geneva in the past.

Soviet uncertainty about Brezhnev's visit appears to have crystallized only in the last week or so; indeed, preparations were still going forward late last week. The most recent public mention of the trip by Moscow was on December 24, about the time the USSR intensified its indirect public criticism of Egypt's cooperation in the step-by-step approach to negotiations sponsored by the US. One day later, Brezhnev sent an "urgent" message to Sadat, apparently requesting that the Egyptians send a delegation to Moscow for talks.

Soviet press officials in Cairo and elsewhere are citing the possibility that Brezhnev's ill health is a factor in the cancellation. Brezhnev has had an unusually heavy diplomatic travel schedule this fall and has, on occasion, shown signs of extreme fatigue. His last public appearance was on December 19 when, with his Politburo colleagues, he attended the opening meeting of the Supreme Soviet.

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PORTUGAL

Voter registration in Portugal is proceeding, but technical problems may delay for a few weeks the election of the constituent assembly next spring.

The government has announced that over 60 percent of the expected 5.5 million voters have registered since December 9. The deadline for registration, however, has been extended until January 8 because of the shortage of forms and other technical problems. As a result, the election date may be moved from late March to April.

The Portuguese Communists--perhaps sensing that they are not going to do well--have charged that the elections are in danger of becoming a farce. The Communists claim that the registration process is being sabotaged in some rural provinces; a government spokesman has denied that irregularities have been discovered.

Communist misgivings about the elections were promptly attacked by the Socialist and Popular Democratic parties. Both parties issued statements deploring any effort to delay or cast doubt on the validity of the elections.

The Communists suffered a setback last week when the Superior Council of the Armed Forces, consisting of 20 of the top leaders of the ruling Armed Forces Movement, issued a statement re-emphasizing that the Movement is not aligned with any political group. Both the Portuguese Communist Party and the Communist-dominated Portuguese Democratic Movement have consistently tried to convince the public that they are closely allied with the Movement.

Meanwhile, the draft economic plan, which has led to considerable dissension within the government, is still under discussion in the cabinet. The plan is also being debated within the Armed Forces Movement;

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the Superior Council has given its general approval. Last weekend the Movement's assembly, composed of approximately 200 officers, met to discuss the draft, but the session did not produce a statement on the economic plan.

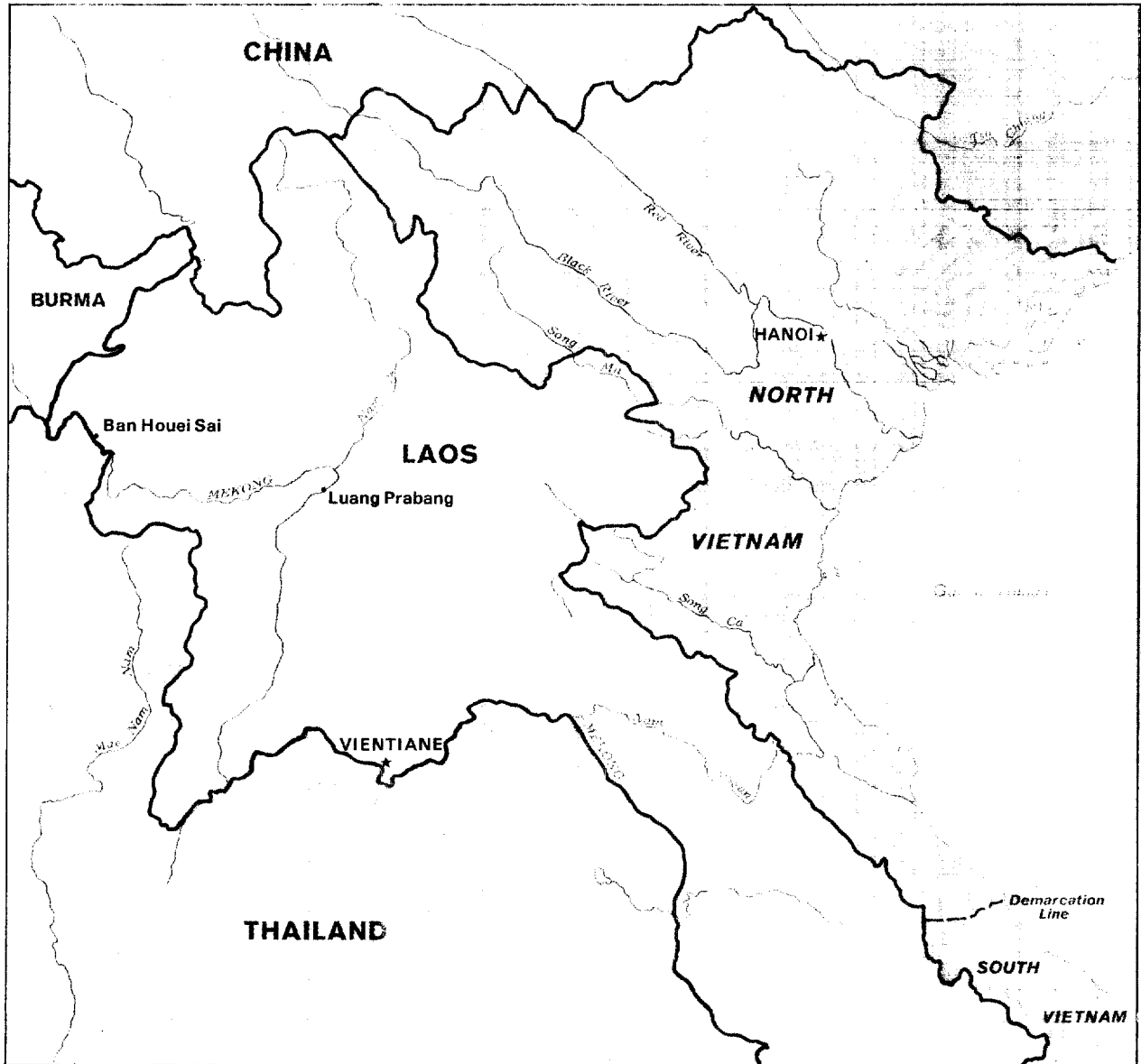


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LAOS

Rebellious Lao army troops are still in control of the remote northwestern provincial capital of Ban Houei Sai, but have tentatively agreed to reopen the town following a meeting this weekend with senior coalition government representatives.

According to the US embassy, all Americans as well as other foreigners detained in Ban Houei Sai were permitted to leave the provincial capital on December 30. All crossed the Mekong River to Thailand and subsequently were flown to Vientiane.

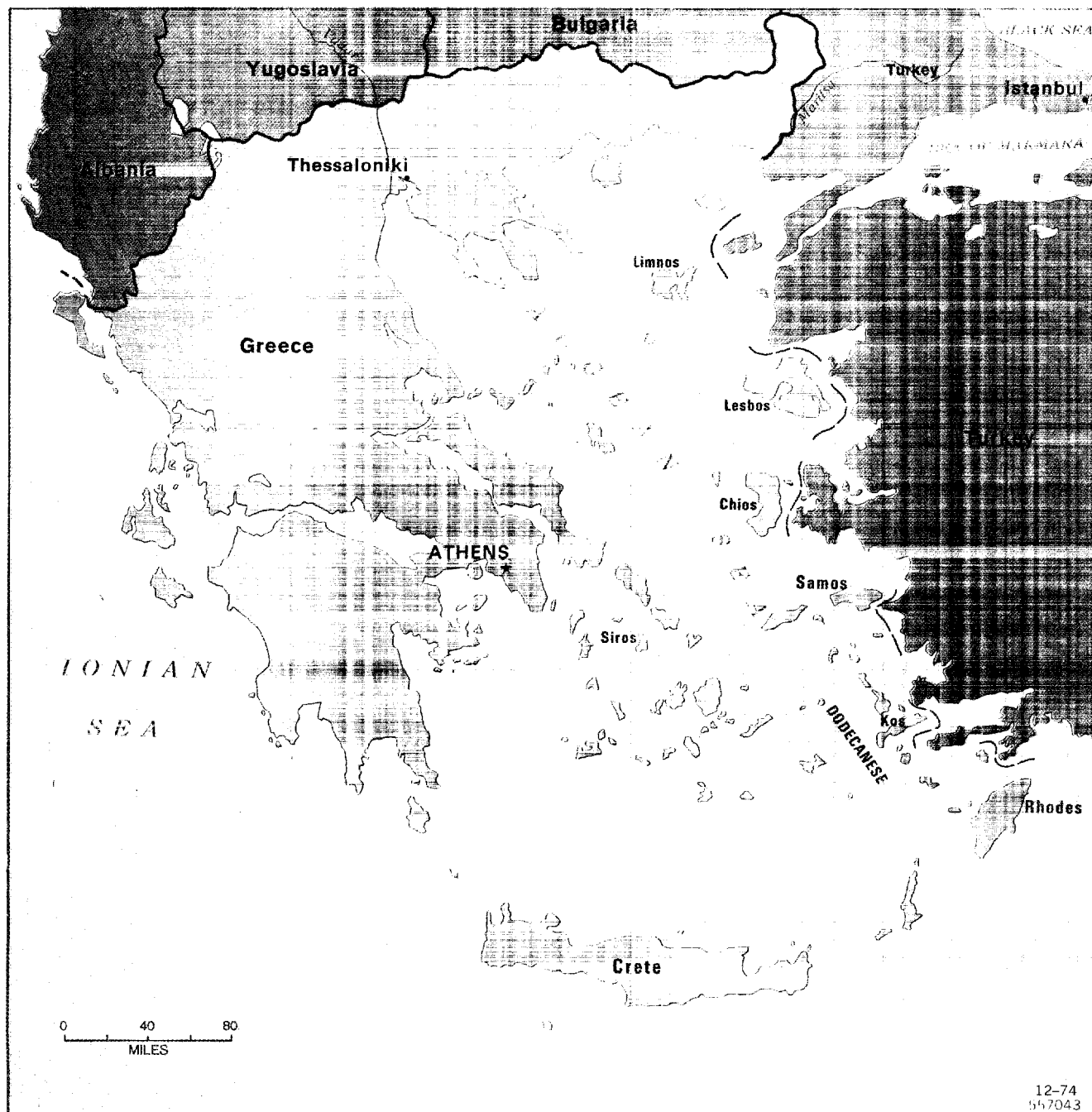
The government negotiators agreed to replace the military and civilian officials whose poor performance had led to the difficulties. It is not yet clear what other concessions were made, but rebel demands for implementation of a number of Communist-inspired political proposals seem to have been finessed. Minister of Interior Pheng Phongsavan, who took part in the negotiations, claimed to the US ambassador that all current problems were resolved.

Pathet Lao coalition officials have denied that any of their forces participated in the uprising.

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FOR THE RECORD

Greece: A major Greek army unit is pulling back from the Turkish border. The American consul in Thessaloniki has reported that during the past weekend the heaviest concentration of military equipment seen since the beginning of the Cyprus crisis was observed moving into Thessaloniki. The equipment--including medium and heavy artillery pieces, tanks, and trucks--probably belongs to the 20th Armored Division, which is en route to its peacetime garrison. This division, one of Greece's top combat units, normally is located in the Thessaloniki area. It was moved to the Turkish frontier last July at the time of the Cyprus invasion.

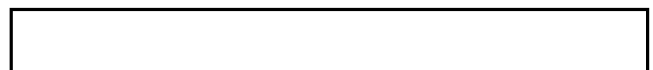
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Nicaragua: Eight Nicaraguans, members of the Sandinist terrorist group that held about a dozen hostages in Managua last weekend, arrived in Havana yesterday. They accompanied 14 of their colleagues, who had been imprisoned in Nicaragua. President Somoza let the terrorists go and yielded to other principal demands of the terrorists, in return for which they released all of their hostages unharmed. The Sandinists, who during the 1960s received Cuban funds, guerrilla training, and material support, were greeted coolly in Havana. The Castro government initially had refused to accept them and seemed to decline responsibility for the entire affair pointing out in a terse announcement that the terrorists were allowed to enter Cuba at the request of the Nicaraguan government.

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